DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 735 HE 030 781

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TITLE Planning and Enacting Reflective Talk among Interns: What Is the Problem?
PUB DATE 1997-03-26
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Case Studies; College Instruction; Educational Attitudes; *Group Discussion; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Preservice Teacher Education; *Reflective Teaching; Secondary Education; *Seminars; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Educators; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Dewey (John); Michigan State University

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the author's conducting a weekly seminar for eight secondary interns (preservice teachers) from Michigan State University working at three middle and high schools. The leader describes the tension he felt in trying to respond to interns' emerging concerns and needs while at the same time trying to preserve an environment in which the interns could share their concerns freely and engage in educative reflection and conversation about their teaching practice. Three cases are used to trace the leader's own thinking and the strategies used to address this dilemma. A structured case discussion method was ultimately developed, based upon Dewey's (1910) framework of reflective thought. This framework is based on recognition of a difficulty, its location and definition, suggestions of possible solutions, development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion, and further observation and experiment leading to the acceptance or rejection of the suggestion. Using this method, one of the interns would present a problem or situation that would be discussed in detail by the group, that would offer suggestions or comments based on the members' own experiences, without making judgments about the exact nature of the problem. (MDM)

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Planning and Enacting Reflective Talk among Interns: What is the Problem?

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Presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference
Chicago, IL
March 26, 1997

IR 020 721

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Abstract

This paper is one in a collection of papers in which liaisons working with preservice teachers at Michigan State University study their own practice. The author focuses on his leadership of a weekly seminar for secondary interns teaching in the field. He describes the tension he feels trying to respond to interns' emergent concerns and felt needs while preserving an environment where interns can share their concerns freely and engage in educative reflection and conversation about their teaching practice. Using three cases, the author traces his own thinking and strategies to address this dilemma. Ultimately he develops a structured case discussion method in which he states the rules explicitly and unilaterally. Rather than sacrificing responsiveness, the structure appears to promote greater freedom, responsibility, and responsiveness among the interns, and the desires of both the author and the interns seem to be met.

The child and the curriculum: A perennial teaching problem

> Intern: "Brian, do you ever have it planned that we can just come in here and blow off steam? I mean, the structured activities are great and everything, but I wonder if you could give us some time just to talk?" (journal)

Teachers and teacher educators have long struggled to understand the relationship between the child and the curriculum (Dewey, 1902/1990). This relationship is complicated when teachers try to be responsive to the interests and developmental readiness of their students while maintaining an idea of the endpoint they would like their students to reach. Like all teachers, I have struggled to come up with a defensible and meaningful conceptualization of my role along with the tasks that this conceptualization would entail. In so doing, I hold myself accountable to a set of ideas I value about good teaching, but I also want to be responsive to the real and perceived needs faced by a group of beginning teachers. I present a case of my own efforts to find a way to bridge this gap and bring the two together.

As a liaison in the Michigan State University teacher preparation program, I help interns, teaching different subjects at three local middle and high schools in their fifth year of teacher preparation, learn to teach. One of my duties is to lead a weekly seminar for all eight of these interns. This shared experience is an important part of our program, one which helps interns to articulate their views of good teaching, to make connections between educational theory and their teaching practice, to learn the value of working and talking together about their work, and to improve their reflective skills by examining their practices together.

Other liaisons and I have worked together to develop weekly seminars which embody a set of ideas about good teaching. These ideas are directly rooted in our own program standards which we use to assess the progress of our interns. These standards represent the results of an ongoing collaborative effort between university professors and school teachers to describe best

teaching practice without sacrificing its necessarily contingent and flexible nature. The standards are divided into four broad categories: 1) knowing subject matters and how to teach them, 2) working with students, 3) creating and managing a classroom learning community, and 4) working and learning in a school and profession. Fundamental to the first three categories are the ideas that teachers must design and implement lessons which "thoughtfully link subject matter and students" by promoting "active learning and thought-fullness" and "build[ing] on students' interests, strengths, and cultural backgrounds." We believe that teaching according to these standards will help the interns "make the classroom an inclusive community."

The fourth standard relates more to the value of an open-minded and reflective stance toward teaching. The seminar is particularly important for developing this stance among beginning preservice teachers. My underlying assumption for the seminar is that the interchange between interns is not about mastering a set of technical teaching skills. With Dewey (1904/1965), I believe that "immediate skill may be got at the cost of power to go on growing" (320). Teacher educators ought to focus their students first on the intellectual work of teaching: the ability to observe closely and attempt to understand classroom happenings rather than technical proficiency and a repertoire of specific behaviors. Given the demanding task of managing a classroom full of students, preservice teachers often naturally focus their desire on gaining a set of effective methods and techniques for maintaining order and keeping the students occupied. However, as Dewey says, "To place the emphasis upon the securing of proficiency in teaching and discipline *puts the attention of the student teacher in the wrong place, and tends to fix it in the wrong direction*" (317-318).

A prerequisite for the kind of deep psychological observation described by Dewey is what he describes in a later essay as open-mindedness: "an active desire to listen to more sides than

one; to give heed to facts from whatever source they come; to give full attention to alternative possibilities; to recognize the possibility of error even in the beliefs that are dearest to us" (Dewey, 1933/1964, 224). In a group full of nervous beginning teachers eager to succeed, this kind of open-mindedness is essential to foster sharing and mutual examination of actual stories of practice, a nerve-wracking idea at best.

These ideas about the purpose of a weekly seminar are not always consistent with the preservice teachers' expectations. In my experience, interns have frequently seen the guided practice seminar as a place to vent about their teaching experiences and get new ideas (in the form of teaching strategies) from me and other interns in the group. They see the group as a support and idea group. As someone who lacked such a group during my first years of teaching, I also see this as a valuable aspect of our weekly meetings. In trying to be responsive to the needs of my students, I try hard to maintain an atmosphere where interns see the group as a safe and useful place to spend their time. My ultimate goal is to find a way of leading the seminar that will responsive to the interns' desires to swap stories and get new ideas and still find a way to help them generate new ways of understanding and explaining the problems they face so that particular problems become instances of more general teaching issues.

To bridge this gap, I tried to plan the guided practice seminar in ways that would allow the interns to bring in their teaching experiences and get new ideas *in the context of reflecting on that experience*. This would allow me to incorporate the interns' agenda into my own agenda. To do this, I use Schon's (1987) description of an architectural design studio as a way to think about the problems of teaching and as a way to guide the interns through this thinking process. Reflective practitioners, as described by Schon, display a "professional artistry" in their work which represents knowledge about how to do their work, knowledge which often remains tacit. These

practitioners regularly engage in a problem solving process he calls "reflection-in-action." In this process, practitioners engaged in their work make on the spot decisions by experimenting with different ways of framing problems and devising on-the-spot experiments to address these problems. One cannot learn to achieve such a level of practice through a mastery of technical skills. "When a problematic situation is uncertain, technical problem solving depends on the prior construction of a well-formed problem--which is not itself a technical task. When a practitioner recognizes a situation as unique, she cannot handle it solely by applying theories or techniques derived from her store of professional knowledge" (6)

For example, experienced teachers are often able to react to classroom situations spontaneously without being aware of the complex thought processes they use to guide their reactions. This thought process is frequently transparent to observers, who see only result of the process--the teacher acting in a way that keeps the class moving forward effectively--without seeing the process itself.. To understand this process better, beginning teachers need to become more aware of how it works. Unlike Schon's design studio masters who can talk to their students as they design, teacher educators cannot talk with preservice teachers as they teach. I see the weekly seminar as a place to re-create some classroom experiences and pull apart the full complexity of these experiences.

Dewey (1910) provides a useful framework for thinking about how to accomplish this pulling apart. He divides the act of reflective thought into five logically distinct steps: "(i) a felt difficulty; (ii) its location and definition; (iii) suggestions of possible solution; (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion; (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection" (72). This framework would provide both content and process for the seminar. Interns would provide the content by coming to the seminar eager to talk about "felt

difficulties"--situations that bothered them in their classrooms. I would then use Dewey's framework to guide their thinking about these situations. The result would be that the interns would get some of the solutions they sought and in the process would share in a powerful experience of reflecting systematically on their teaching. Or so I thought.

I did not expect that interns would be able to move immediately to this level of dialogue, so I intended to lead them through each step of the plan. Based on my previous experiences with interns, I knew that they might tend to jump quickly to the giving of solutions without focusing on step two: the location and definition of a problem. I spent the first few weeks asking the interns to focus on very specific aspects of the classroom experience: the teacher, the students, the interaction between teacher and student, the interaction between students. By doing so, I was trying to help them understand the range of possible explanations for problems that occur in classrooms. Through the occasional introduction and discussion of theory, we would together develop a shared language they might use to think about different ways of framing problems.

I hoped that eventually we would reach a point where we could hold a discussion following Dewey's five steps of reflection almost naturally, unprompted by me. I learned early in the year that this goal I had set for myself would be more difficult than I imagined. Watch closely as I implement my plan during an early seminar in which I hoped to focus on different ways of explaining and describing student behavior as one piece of understanding classroom situations. The indented quotations are excerpts from my journal, written shortly after I conducted each session.

Act 1, Scene 1--The "syringe" discussion: A felt difficulty

> Everything that I planned backfired. I felt a terrible distance between me and my interns. I even had to reprimand one of the interns for 'bad behavior' during the seminar.

I can clearly recall the frustration I felt at the end of this seminar, the fourth meeting of the year with my interns. Having a year of experience under my belt and having spent a great deal of time thinking about how I would run this year's seminars, I had been so eager to begin this year with a new group of interns. Here I was, watching my expectations disintegrate before my eyes.

I began the day with a warning about attendance and punctuality at the seminar. I continued with a follow-up question to a topic from the previous week. The interns were not involved in the discussion; I felt frustrated. Finally I asked them point blank what was happening.

> "You guys seem really dead." Someone said "Well, it's Monday, we're tired. We can't get into this on a Monday afternoon." I said, "Am I going to have to fight you all day long?" And a couple of them sort of grumbled, "Yes."

I persisted and kept asking the kinds of questions I hoped they would begin to ask each other. I assumed that by modeling a particular behavior that the interns would follow suit, but they didn't seem to be getting the hint. Whenever I asked a question, one intern answered it, while the others sat quietly and listened. If I asked no further question, the next person would venture a report and endure a series of questions from me. I was working so hard with no result. I had no idea how they were reacting to each other's stories--they did not question or comment on one another's stories--just waited to go next. (Later, when I asked for a midterm evaluation of how the interns felt about the seminar, one of them jokingly called me "the grand inquisitor of TE").

This rough start was about to get even rougher. My next plan of attack was to introduce a quotation from Dewey (1904/1965). "As every teacher knows, children have an inner and outer attention" (318). I saw this quotation as a way of framing the student observations they had conducted during the previous week. I believed that this theoretical discussion might give them some alternative possibilities for explaining their classroom experiences in a slightly different way.

This was my attempt to balance the interns' agenda with my own--creating an activity that allowed interns to share stories from their practice as part of the more difficult task of trying to understand what the stories were about. Educational theory would provide a way to begin this task. But watch what happens.

Rather than explaining my rationale to the interns, I led a short discussion about the meaning of the quotation. The interns participated in this discussion willingly. When I felt convinced that the group members felt fairly comfortable with how Dewey used the terms "inner" and "outer attention," I asked them the question:

> "Is it true that every teacher knows that children have an inner and outer attention? What evidence do we have of that?" No immediate responses to that ... so I said, "Listen, I am giving you the chance here to talk about your experiences in classrooms--what you wrote about in your journals or anything that happened in class."

Two interns offered to tell stories about the students they had been observing in their classes as an assignment for the week. Both were able to describe the students and the things they had noticed. However, as soon as I said, "So how does that relate to inner and outer attention?" everything stopped while I busily tried to figure out how to make the expected conversation happen. Just as frustration began to hit a peak--I was losing my focus and the interns were completely disengaged, Karl offered to tell a story.

> "Well, I have a story but I'm not sure it has to do with this topic." In what I'm sure was a frustrated tone, I said, "Just tell us any story, anything that happened in your class." He told us about how there had been a sub in the classroom last Friday and as he conducted class, one of the boys had gotten out a syringe filled with water and used it to squirt the girl in front of him. At that point, Karl took the syringe and threw it into the garbage. Another boy who claimed to be the owner of the syringe complained that he didn't even know the other boy had it. Karl was concerned about whether he was justified in taking, and then throwing out the syringe. Karl also said that the boy had said something like, "Jesus Christ!" and the sub, who was "apparently very religious" took the boy into the hallway to discuss this with him.

I saw this story as an opportunity to have the kind of discussion I wanted. Here was a situation that Karl felt as a genuine problem and that he was willing to discuss with the group. I wanted to spend some time with the group trying to focus in on defining the problem and thinking about different ways to understand the cause of the problem. Once we more fully understood the problem, we might be able to think about different ways Karl might have dealt with the situation.

I wanted to understand better what was happening in the classroom. I felt this story was interesting because there were a number of ways of looking at the problem. On one hand, the immediate problem was that the boy had squirted the girl. Another way of understanding the problem was that the intern was unaware of what the students in the classroom were doing. Still another way of thinking about the problem was that the lesson was structured in a way which had not managed to engage the student's attention. One could also focus on the student and ask questions about whether this student had a problem with this particular girl, whether he was just seeking attention, whether he wanted to see what he could accomplish with impunity. The list could go on.

Rather than considering these possibilities and focusing on the teacher's problem formulation process, the interns seemed to formulate their own understanding of the problem and moved quickly to thinking about solutions for their understanding of the problem. In the following exchange, you can clearly see me trying to raise questions to prompt a discussion about defining the problem, with disastrous results.

> Another intern asked, "Well, that's a good question. Can we do that? I mean, do school rules allow us to confiscate something that belongs to a student and then throw it away?" As she said this, she turned directly to me and asked me the question .... At that point I didn't want to be the authoritative person in the room. I wanted to emphasize the conditional and necessarily flexible nature of teachers' classroom decisions, and I wanted them to think about the process they might use to think about such a problem, since someday they might also have to make a snap decision without a long weighing of the

> consequences ... Karl talked about how students in schools did not have the same rights as regular citizens out in the world ... The interns were highly entertained by this idea of a kid with a syringe in class, a hidden and loaded weapon. What kind of syringe was it? Was it a piece of drug paraphernalia? Karl: "I can't imagine a possible illegal use for this thing." Did he know it was someone else's syringe when he threw it in the garbage? Was it valuable? Karl: "I didn't know whether it could have any personal significance for this student or the owner." Another intern, Jake, told us that he used to get similar syringes during his high school days on the black market. The interns were amused, and somewhat horrified, by this, but it also heightened the comical nature of the whole story.
>
> The discussion continued in this comical manner during which Jake kept laughing and making faces at [the other interns], and comments under his breath or to [the other interns]. I kept trying to push the issue about how this might have related to inner and outer attention (my thought being that for some reason this kid's inner attention was completely devoted to the use of this squirt gun--what was it about what was happening in class that his inner attention was not engaged elsewhere?) I also kept asking Karl and the others what the problem really was in this case. "The problem is that this kid squirted the girl, and she got quite wet," was the (humorous) response, and they all agreed.

The interns began to describe what they would have done in the same situation. These descriptions were frequently prefaced by a statements like this: "You can do whatever you want in your *own* classroom, but if I were faced with the same situation, this is what *I* would do."

> The other interns were all very caught up in the personal property issues and they agreed that none of them would have taken it because they didn't really know who the thing belonged to or what they might have needed it for. They talked about other ways of conditionally confiscating it (putting it on the desk and returning it later, sending it to the office to be picked up later by the students' parents, etc.). At one point, Karl said, "So none of you think I did the right thing?" He actually seemed sort of beaten down to me, and he said something like, "Well, [my collaborating teacher] backed me up 100%." I jumped in and quickly took his side and said I probably would have done just what Karl had done in that situation, but I wanted to explore a little bit more about the situation itself.

I continued to push forward with my line of questioning and ask what was happening before the incident. Karl asked me what I was suggesting and I suggested that the problem might have been related to something about the class that had not managed to capture this student's attention.

> At this point, William was about to say something, but Jake kept laughing and talking. Several times William began, several times Jake interrupted. Finally William began to talk in spite of Jake. I simply turned to Jake, gave him a glare, and said, "I would appreciate it

> if you would listen when other people in the group are talking thank you very much." At that point Jake became quiet for the remainder of the time, essentially saying nothing again for the rest of the seminar. I turned to face William, who said something like, "I can't believe we've just spent 1/2 an hour on this what seems like a trivial incident, (laughter ensued, indicating widespread agreement to me) and yeah, maybe it's worthwhile that we discussed these things but things like this are just going to happen. We've got to deal with them in our own ways."

Act 1, Scene 2--Framing the Problem

What was happening to my well laid plan? Feeling quite frustrated myself, I decided to find out how the interns felt about this session.

> I said to them that I was a bit unhappy about how things had gone, and I wanted us together to figure out ways that we could make this time useful to them ... [One intern] said that she liked the opportunity to share stories and hear that other people were facing the same situations. William over and over kept talking about a "bitch" session--on one hand, he didn't think that's all the seminar should be, but in some way that was a part of it. William also said that he wished sometimes that I would follow the interns more rather than the interns following me. He talked about feeling somehow confined by some of the more formal activities and having to fit his own experience into the activities I had chosen. [Another intern] agreed, but also realized aloud that it would be hard for me to somehow have ESP and know what they wanted to talk about from week to week. She realized that they couldn't just come in each week and share stories all over the place. Karl said that sometimes he got the sense that he didn't know where I stood on issues. He would like it if I would be more direct in expressing my opinion.

The interns liked sharing stories but felt confined by the way I was structuring this experience. They did not feel they were learning anything from what was supposed to be a reflection on a case, using theory as a gloss for the problem. They felt confused about where I stood and wanted me to express my opinion more directly. This was exactly what I did *not* want to do. I did not want to suggest that the purpose of our meetings was simply to come up with solutions to classroom problems. I wanted the group together to come up with solutions as a product of the process of delving more deeply into the problems.

In keeping with my project proposal I thought about the problem in terms of agendas. I had acted according to my plan , yet clearly I had failed to connect my agenda with theirs. I had

given the interns an opportunity to share stories from their teaching experiences and I had attempted to guide them using a series of questions focusing on the second step of Dewey's framework for reflective thinking. The end result was supposed to be that the interns would consider different ways of thinking about the problems they faced in their practice and understand the value of this process for thinking about how to address such situations in the future. For some reason this was not happening.

As I reflected on these responses, I tried to formulate for myself an understanding of another problem: the one I was facing as leader of the seminar. My initial framing of the problem was to see the interns as lacking the important quality of open-mindedness, particularly the aspect of "giv[ing] full attention to alternative possibilities" (Dewey, 1904/1964). This was occurring in two ways. First, the interns seemed to be formulating a rigid understanding of the problem individually without considering other possibilities. Some of the interns framed it as a problem of understanding school regulations about confiscation of student property, others saw it as a technical problem about how to confiscate contraband without even raising the policy issues, others saw it as a humorous but idiosyncratic event that comes up inevitably in teaching. I framed it as a potential problem of structuring the lesson in a certain way that might have given the student the opportunity or desire to act in a certain way.

This rigid framing of problems resulted in a different violation of open-mindedness. We all stopped listening to each other. Regardless of how we each framed the problem, no one (including me) made explicit the differences between the way each of us was framing the problem. Perhaps this did not seem important to anyone since we each had our own way of understanding the situation and were satisfied that in our own mind, we had each developed a satisfactory solution to the problem. By stating suggestions as personal responses to idiosyncratic problems,

we were making hasty judgments about the context of these situations without fully understanding why the situation represented a problem. I wanted us to be asking questions of one another, not stating solutions to problems.

This violation of open-mindedness was particularly troubling to me because I wanted the seminar to be a place where interns felt comfortable bringing situations to discuss. As a leader, I believed I was failing to preserve a set of group norms which would foster reflective discussions about concrete particular classroom events. In my desire to be responsive to the interns, I had allowed them to talk to each other in a way that ran counter to my goals for the group. I was trying to begin with the way of talking that came most naturally to the interns and guide it gently, implicitly, toward a way of talking that I valued. As I thought more about this, I became convinced that we could not continue along the same path, sharing solutions with one another without understanding the nature of the problem. My idea was to find a way to convince them that the kind of open-mindedness and reflection I wanted to accomplish was what they all wanted even though they didn't know it yet. But how to accomplish this?

Act 2--The "norms" discussion: Groping for a solution

My first plan was to speak with Jake individually to explain why I had gotten angry with him

> Had a conversation with Jake last week about group norms. He said that after I yelled at him he thought to himself how he was behaving just like his students. I also tried to point out that I was feeling particularly frustrated with him because I believed that his actions helped to set a certain tone in the group, a tone that might inhibit participation from the members of the group. I suggested that Karl might have felt not listened to, or not taken seriously. Jake said he had talked afterward with Karl and didn't believe Karl felt this way, but he could understand that his way of acting might have jeopardized the willingness of other people to speak up and say things in the group. He suggested that we have a discussion about different styles of interaction. He personally claimed to be a direct person and liked it when people were direct with him. He doesn't like it when people ask him a lot of questions. He wants to know just what they are thinking.

I thought his suggestion about discussing norms with group was a good one. I created a plan in which I hoped that the interns would surface a variety of different ways that group members interact with each other. Once we had a range of different norms on the table we would be able to have a discussion about what kinds of norms might be most effective for groups to have the kinds of discussion that I wanted to have.

Of course, what I secretly hoped was that I would help the group see the benefits of adopting Dewey's open-minded stance with one another to establish an environment for honest, thorough discussions. I also wanted them to share my vision of how this open-mindedness would play out in the seminar. What happened, was, in short, I lost.

> After thanking them for being on time, I introduced this notion of group norms. I said that I had obviously been frustrated with the way the group had gone last week, and that I had a conversation with some of the interns about the different communication styles of individuals, and that I thought it would be worthwhile for us to have a discussion about these potential differences and decide in common how we wanted to proceed as a group. I asked the interns to write for about five minutes about this question: "How do you communicate, and how would you like to be communicated with in this seminar?" As the interns wrote, I wrote as well ... When they were all finished, I said "Would someone like to start, or shall we just go around? I would like to hear from everyone one way or another. I don't want to be the one to start." Silence. I look around. Wait.

Finally the interns began to offer their ideas. I looked at Karl and hoped that he had something to say about how he felt during the syringe discussion. To my dismay, he stated that he prefers "directness" and is bothered when he asks a question and is answered with a question--something he feels happens quite frequently in his teacher education classes. When he speaks directly to others, he wants them to understand that he never intends this as an attack. Here he was, the person on whom I wanted to base my case for open-mindedness, supporting the other side. At this point, Jake entered the discussion and agreed with Karl and other things which had been said.

I got three responses which made me think about how I might be able to make a case for my vision of open-mindedness:

> 1) Emily sometimes gets the feeling that some people might want to say things but feel uncomfortable speaking up.
> 2) Ben would also like to hear other people's suggestions and be open. Says that we should be professional about discussion ... I ask what he means by professional, and he replies that it has something to do with education. (I was thinking that he might say something about a professional way of treating one another).
> 3) William wants us to treat each other like adults, in a friendly way, joking when appropriate, but also listening and gaining some respect from each other. I ask him more about respect, if it just includes listening, and he agrees generally.

Based on these statements, I made a distinction between my understanding of directness and open-mindedness. I asked the interns how we could reconcile the idea that people sometimes feel uncomfortable to talk with the idea that people want to be direct. I explained that when people are very direct with me, I get defensive. When I asked if other people felt this way, no one responded.

Someone brought up the issue of power and claimed that it would be possible for the interns to speak to each other directly because they knew that none of the other interns had a lock on teaching. They would take each other's comments with a grain of salt. I asked what would happen when I made statements since I did have some power--in my university role and as an experienced teacher. I wanted to avoid a situation where I said things directly to the group and the group accepted it without question. They assured me that this had not happened and that they could not imagine a situation in which I would use my power to achieve this result. With the mention of university role, the discussion moved on to grading and programmatic issues, and I accepted momentary defeat with the statement to the interns that "this is a discussion we need to continue at some further point, but now we need to move along."

Why? Reasoning out the Bearings of the Suggestion

The interns wanted to the group (including me) to be "direct" and "open" with one another. Since I had presented the norms discussion to them as a democratic process of shared group decision making, I had to go along with the desires of the group. However, this group decision unsettled and disturbed me, because I saw the kind of directness they had described as possibly harmful to the kind of reflective thinking I wanted to foster.

I shared my frustration with fellow liaisons and other colleagues. As I described the situation, one of the team leaders raised a question. What did the interns mean when they said they wanted to be "direct" with one another? Perhaps the problem did not lie so much in their failure to embrace an open-minded stance but in my own failure to make clear to my interns what kind of participation I expected from them.

As I thought back on our conversation, I realized that all of the interns *were* interested in open communication. They all expressed a desire to hear all points of view and to hear different arguments. They also expressed some frustration with being asked questions without understanding the underlying intent of the questions. They believed that the best way to achieve truly open communication was to encourage everyone to state their points directly to one another and not to take each other's statements too harshly. Why was I still worried about our ability to have a truly open conversation?

I began to think more about the idea of directness and why it appealed so much to the group. One understanding of directness is to think of it as a kind of bluntness in conversation, a "shoot from the hip" kind of communication which gives one license to say anything that comes to mind to any person at any time. This kind of directness is reflected in debates in which both sides take clear cut positions, argue forcefully and relentlessly for their case, and wait for a third

party to decide the winner. In a group setting, this is an irresponsible position which closes off opportunities for careful listening and joint examination of problems. Surely, no one would agree that this superficial treatment of others' problems would be beneficial to any group.

Another understanding of the word direct is to think of it as a kind of explicitness. The interns wanted me to be more direct with them and they wanted to be free to be direct with each other. In my efforts to be responsive to their interests and preferences, I had been indirect by keeping my thought process implicit, under the surface. Although I had explained my overarching goals at the beginning of the year, I had often asked questions without explaining the reasoning behind my questions. They might understandably have perceived these questions as patronizing, frustrating, and mysterious. Clearly, there must be times when being direct--by being explicit about my agenda for the seminar--would be rightfully expected and helpful.

ACT 3--Jake's case: Reframing the problem

Armed with my new way of thinking about the problem, I devise a new plan, based on one of the team leader's suggestions. She had suggested that I have one intern specifically prepare something to come and talk about with the group, a case in which the explicit function of the group would be to help this individual work to understand a problem they were having. In the process of this, I could be clear up front about establishing a set of rules that we would use to discuss the case.

By a stroke of luck, I had spoken to Jake on the phone during the week and asked him if he would be willing to present a situation to the group that we could think about together. He agreed. On the day of the seminar, I first introduced them to Dewey's framework for thinking about problem solving and gave them a set of rules for how to proceed with the discussion.

> This is my model for reflective thinking. In thinking about a case, we need to think about all five of Dewey's steps. He starts with a problem to solve and from there we have to go on a to the location and definition of the problem. For me this represents the stuff I feel I've been pushing since the beginning. The third step is this notion that once we understand the nature of the problem we can think about possible solutions. Then we try them out and see if they work well or poorly.
>
> The problem in teaching situations is that you have to do this stuff on the fly ... It's all condensed into about two seconds of decision making time. In this space we have more of an opportunity to pick it apart. That's what I was trying to do with the syringe case that didn't make any sense to you. I have included a segment from Dewey that is pretty descriptive of what I'm trying to do. Let's take a minute to read over that.

Together we read a quotation from Dewey about a physician trying to diagnose an illness. Before jumping to conclusions, the physician suspends judgment and asks questions, making hypotheses along the way, to determine the true nature of the problem. After they had finished reading I summarized the importance of the reading for me:

> The notion here is the idea that we don't want to jump to conclusions ... I'm warning you in advance that this is going to be a long conversation. The way we're going to do it is we're going to have Jake speak on a problematic situation for 5-10 minutes. Then instead of jumping to a conclusion about what he might do to solve his problem, we're going into this questioning mode, like a doctor. We're going to make sure that together we do steps one and two: understanding the difficulty he is feeling and then locating and defining the problem ... We're not allowed to make any suggestions for 10-15 minutes and then Jake will respond to our questions. Then we can brainstorm together about possible suggestions. He might have some reactions to that and he can tell us how those suggestions might bear out. Does everyone understand how I want to do this?

Jake told us the situation about Charlie, a student who just refused to settle down at the beginning of the class time, who swore constantly, and who did not listen to anyone else's ideas because he saw himself as an expert in the class. I began the discussion by stating, "I'm not going to ask questions but I'm going to ask you all to pose some questions that might help us to get at the source of the problem." We proceeded to have a forty-five minute series of questions and answers in which I was mostly silent. During this whole time I posed one question that I wanted Jake to answer.

At the end of this round, I asked the interns to state their current understanding of the problem. We began to formulate different ways of understanding the problem. One intern suggested that this student's behavior had something to do with fairness in the way the different students in the class are being treated. Another intern suggested that the problem was that this student thinks he knows everything there is to know about the class. Another intern suggested that there was a problem with the other students in the class who were unwilling to stand up to this one student. Yet another intern raises a third possible alternative, that these students felt like they were being rewarded for bad behavior.

The interns expressed the range of possibilities for understanding and addressing the problem. William said, "So what's the difficulty. Sounds like you've got a bunch of different ones. There's different solutions depending on how you see the problem." Another intern remarked, "I'm lost on where the central problem is because there are a lot of problems." Pleased with our progress and eager to preserve the momentum, I decided to move to the next step. "I want to move into solutions. To me this is what complicates these issues. But it depends on what kind of problem you're trying to solve." Jake said, "I've heard a lot of them and am running them through my head as we go."

In my opinion, this was a success in every aspect. We had been direct with one another without sacrificing our open-mindedness. We had worked through the Dewey's five-step process of reflection and spent a significant but productive time on the second step, the location and definition of the problem. Best of all, I was not the only one happy with this discussion. At the end of the discussion, I asked the interns to provide some feedback. "We spent a long amount of time just talking about Jake. What did you think about this format?" Responses were completely positive.

"Who's on the block next week?"
"I thought it went pretty good."
"It was kind of structured but kind of not structured. It was an interesting topic, though."
"The way the format was... we can look at some of the solutions and ideas that we thought about and apply them to our situations."
"If we do one of these each week, we'll have them all covered."

As an added bonus, we ended up getting a volunteer to provide a case to us the following week, an unexpected surprise.

Conclusion

Jake's case was a far cry from the syringe discussion. In both instances we spent a significant amount of time discussing one person's case. However, after the syringe discussion the interns felt that we had wasted half an hour examining a situation which was just one isolated phenomenon in one person's classroom. In Jake's case, even though the discussion did not focus specifically on their own situations, they felt that the discussion helped them to think about possible future situations. They were eager to conduct similar discussions.

In the syringe discussion, the interns were not responding to each other in ways that I thought were most productive. I was unsatisfied with the role I played in trying to direct the discussion. In Jake's case, the interns followed the rules that I had set for them--asking each other questions, suspending judgment about the nature of the problem. Although I had exerted my authority in getting them to behave in this manner, the ensuing conversation did not feel as though I had suppressed the needs or interests of the interns. I felt good about what I had done, and the interns all eagerly participated and reacted positively to the experience.

Why such a change? One possible explanation is that during the month of practice teaching which had elapsed between the two sessions, the interns had acquired a more acute sense of understanding the difficulty in understanding classroom situations. I would argue that another

more plausible explanation is that in Jake's case the interns had a better understanding of what we were doing and why we were doing it. This was possible only because I had been more explicit about my purposes.

I was able to make this change in my leadership of the seminar because my definition of the problem had changed. Initially, I had seen the problem as the interns' failure to be open-minded with one another. I thought I was seeing evidence that they were not listening to one another and not considering alternate formulations of classroom problems. I was frustrated by their desire to suggest solutions to one another before fully discussing the nature of the problem. Upon examining this problem further in the norms discussion, I realized that the interns *did* value the kind of open-mindedness I sought. The problem lay elsewhere.

My second formulation of the problem was to make a distinction between the different understandings of "directness" in communication. One understanding sees direct communication like hitting someone over the head with a blunt hammer without regard for the other's feelings. Alternately, directness might seen as an explicit statement of purpose or idea, like opening up a folder to expose the contents rather than just looking at the title on the outside of the folder. I still believe that the first type of directness is a way of conversation that destroys group trust and future willingness to be open with each other. However, without the second type (especially from the leader of the group), group members may feel confused, frustrated, or patronized.

In my mind I had blurred this distinction and had seen directness only as a negative use of my authority to force-feed my agenda to the interns without regard for their wants or needs. As in the syringe discussion, by allowing the structure to be flexible and completely responsive to individual personal preferences, I tried secretly to guide the interns to my way of thinking, only to end up with everyone feeling frustrated. Once I began to see the second type of directness as

essential, I became more willing to accept the authority role and assert my authority by dictating a particular structure for the group based on Dewey's framework. In so doing, I actually took myself *out* of the discussion and facilitated a greater sense of freedom, responsibility and responsiveness among the interns.

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